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ABSTRACT

Semantic mapping is effective with expository prose but not as effective with narrative prose. To achieve a better understanding of narrative prose, yet still keep the benefits of semantic mapping, the traditional approach can be modified into a technique called "episodic mapping." Episodic mapping is based on the idea that most stories contain several major ideas and follow a particular structure, typically called story grammar. While the grammar of individual stories may vary, the structures of most stories focus around setting, plot, and resolution. The five elements in episodic mapping include: setting, problem/goal, major episodes, theme, and resolution. After episodic mapping is understood, the next step is to teach it to the students. In a classroom application, students grades 3 through 6 were very responsive to episodic mapping, with "low" students benefitting the most. Episodic mapping has potential for the reading teacher who is trying to teach and encourage interest in narrative prose. (MM)

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Episodic Mapping: A Technique to Help Students Understand Stories

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Episodic Mapping: A Technique to Help Students Understand Stories

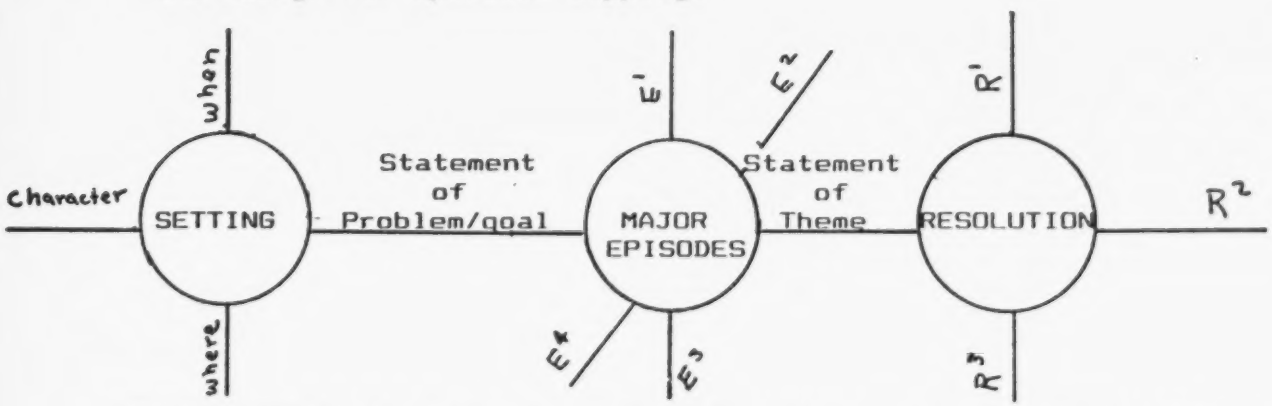
Semantic mapping (Heimlich & Pittelman, 1986) is a well known and often applied reading technique. It is based on the idea that to better understand and remember a selection one must be able to relate how each of the ideas in a selection are connected to one another. It is called "semantic" mapping because each of the ideas in the map are related semantically (meaningfully) to each other.

Semantic mapping is effective with expository prose, e.g., chapters or parts of a textbook, but not as effective with narrative prose, e.g., short stories or novels. A possible reason for this difference is that in a traditional semantic map the reader usually focuses on one major idea which has a number of related sub-ideas, i.e., the main idea of the chapter and the various sub-categories. On the other hand, in a short story or novel there are usually several major ideas each with its related sub-categories; all of these major ideas are interrelated, thus, they are more difficult to map.

To achieve a better understanding of narrative prose, yet still keep the benefits of semantic mapping, it was decided to modify the traditional approach into a technique called Episodic Mapping. Episodic mapping is based on the idea that most stories contain several major ideas that follow a particular structure. The structure that stories typically

follow is called story grammar (Meyer & Rice, 1984). It is known that if students understand the structure of a story it improves their learning and retention. Knowledge of story grammar also enhances a reader's ability to sense what will follow and to be better able to make predictions about what will come next, (Vacca & Vacca, 1986) a key element in reading comprehension.

While the grammar of individual stories may vary somewhat, the structures of most stories focus around Setting, Plot, and Resolution. The following diagram* shows the design for episodic mapping.



*The diagram depicted is an example. Stories vary in what is included in the Setting, the Episodes, and Resolution.

The five elements in Episodic Mapping include: setting, problem/goal, major episodes, theme, and resolution.

Setting. The setting of a story introduces the main character(s). It also defines important background information which includes when and where the story takes place.

Problem/Goal. This section states the problem or goal that

the character(s) is trying to resolve or attain as a result of some initiating event that has set the story into motion.

Major Episodes. This section is the plot of the story: the attempts that the character(s) make to resolve the problem or reach their goal.

Theme. This section refers to the central idea of the story. It may be some kind of lesson or underlying thought that the main character(s) has learned as a result of his or her success or failure to attain the goal attainment or resolve the problem. The "theme", as defined here, relates the events in the story to some broader set of concerns, e.g., honesty is the best policy.

Resolution. The purpose of this section is to organize the conclusion of the story in order to answer the question, "How has the story been resolved?". How did the character(s) achieve or fail to achieve the goal or resolve the problem?

Teaching Episodic Mapping.

After one understands and can apply Episodic Mapping the next step is to teach it to students. In the try-outs the following teaching procedure was developed.

Step 1: Explain the purpose of episodic mapping. Its main purpose is to increase a person's understanding of a story by knowing how it is put together. A second purpose is to encourage class discussion. Since each person's ideas about a story is valid everyone can contribute to a story's understanding.

Step 2: Explain each of the elements that make-up episodic mapping, i.e., setting, problem/goal, major episodes, theme, and resolution.

Step 3. Model how you mapped a story that everyone has read. While mapping the story try to explain why you mapped the story as you did. While your thinking may be different from some or even most of your students, the children will, through yourmodeling get a "feel" for the kinds of thinking that should take place.

Step 4. Read and map a story together. This takes a lot of discussion as well as give and take.

Step 5: Provide students with a story and a partially completed episodic map. Have them complete it by themselves. After all of the students have completed it, develop with the students a "composite" map on the board, editing as necessary.

Step 6. Allow the students to map selections on their own incorporating mapping into their normal repertoire of reading strategies.

In try-outs we have found that students (grades 3 through 6--including a high school class of special education students) have been very responsive to episodic mapping. It is relatively easy to teach and learn and it encourages everyone's active participation. Indeed, the interest of our students in reading narrative prose seems to have increased dramatically.

While "good" and "average" students enjoyed and learned from episodic mapping, we have found that the "low" achievers seem to have benefitted even more. We have been surprised at how much these low achieving youngsters have contributed to story discussions. Part of this may be the new-ness of the activity but more importantly it seems that episodic mapping helps these children put story abstractions into the concrete; giving the children something more tangible to work through. The visual nature of the episodic map seems to help the children better understand the interrelatedness of the story. In the try-outs we have been especially impressed with the inferential thinking that has gone on in class discussions.

It seems that episodic mapping has potential for the reading teacher who is trying to teach and encourage interest in narrative prose. While episodic mapping can be used to teach story grammar and the interrelation of the parts of a selection, it might also be used to reinforce or teach many of the specific skills necessary for reading comprehension including, sequencing, cause and effect, drawing conclusions and predicting outcomes.

While at this point there is no empirical evidence for Episodic mappings' usefulness, experience suggests that it has value. You too might find it to be a useful technique.

Heimlich, J.E. & Pittelman, S. D. (1986). Semantic mapping: Classroom applications. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Meyer, B. J. & Rice, G. E. (1984). The structure of text. In P.D. Pearson, et. al. (Eds.) Handbook of reading research New York: Longman.

Vacca, R. T. & Vacca, J. L. (1986). Content area reading, (2nd. ed.). Boston: Little Brown. (See especially Chapter 2)